Cubs clubhouse’ sports medicine facility will allow players to return to action faster

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Kyle Schwarber underwent surgery on Tuesday, April 19 for an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and lateral cruciate ligament tear (LCL) reconstruction on his left knee after his season-ending collision with Dexter Fowler in Arizona 12 days earlier. The surgery was performed in Dallas by Cowboys-affiliated orthopedic surgeon Dr. Daniel Cooper.

While Schwarber is predicted to be out the rest of the 2016 season, this writer suspects the Cubs may get some immediate return on their mega-investment for building a new 30,000-square-foot clubhouse. A state-of-the-art sports medicine facility is one of the highlights. As the first beneficiary of this fabulous new in-house rehabilitation facility, Schwarber may surprise everyone. It’s a long shot, but state-of-the-art training area could allow a Schwarber late-season return to the Cubs.

Other early-season injured Cubs players Miguel Montero, Matt Szczur, and Jason Heyworth have also benefited with the Cubs improved rehab facility. Heyworth’s wrist injury did not require him to go on the disabled list. He only missed a few games. Montero was able to return back to lineup on Friday, May 13, after spending 15 days on the DL.

The new clubhouse is located under the former triangle-shaped parking lot adjacent to the west side of Wrigley Field. Until 1961, Collins & Wiese Coal Company was located at 3637 N, Clark Street. Its large coal storage bins are visible in many iconic photos of Wrigley Field.

A vintage aerial photo shows the Collins and Weise coal bins, at left, where the present clubhouse was dug into the ground. It is the only big-league clubhouse located outside the ballpark.
Engineering marvel re-brands Cubs facilities image

On Tuesday, April 12, the day after the Cubs’ Opening Night win, the team hosted a media tour – of which I was fortunate to be able to attend – of the clubhouse. It was the lone opportunity for still photography within the clubhouse. Still photography is otherwise prohibited within the clubhouse at all times.

There was a brief introductory press conference that featured Theo Epstein, president of baseball operations; Crane Kenney, president of business operations, and Carl Rice, vice president of the Wrigley Field Restoration and Expansion.

The new clubhouse was completed as part of Phase Two of the 1060 Project. According to Kenney, Cubs players came to management for ideas for the new clubhouse.

“This new space for the players is even more incredible than you had imagined,” raved BleedCubbieBlue operator Al Yellon (see link http://www.bleedcubbieblue.com/2016/4/12/11416688/wrigley-field-clubhouse-tour-awesome#6424349 for additional photos).
Undoubtedly, the Cubs now have the best facility in the major leagues. The clubhouse now becomes a major marketing piece to lure free agents to play at Wrigley Field.

“Several of the players remarked we are going to have to put up a ‘No Vacancy’ sign and turn away interested free-agents,” joked Epstein, outlining the belief that now that the Cubs have another lure to attract top players.

Cubs management toured 25 other MLB home clubhouses to solicit ideas for their new facility, which is located 22 feet beneath the street surface. The space is an engineering marvel built out of an underground cavity surrounded by Lake Michigan beach sand. Fifteen-year-old concerns about the water table from the nearby lake preventing the underground construction were allayed by engineers.

(From left) Cubs baseball chief Theo Epstein; Carl Rice, vice president of the Wrigley Field Restoration, and Cubs business chief Crane Kenney as they introduce the new clubhouse.

Originally, Kenney said the Cubs were going to build the new clubhouse within the existing footprint of Wrigley Field “and double the space (of the existing 11,000-square-foot clubhouse) in the original configuration, but we kept running into limitations due to column lines. Carl Rice came up with the idea to dig a big hole under the plaza and the (Ricketts) family supported it.”

Kenney would not reveal the cost, but hinted it was double the original cost of a new clubhouse built within the ballpark.

In addition to the spacious clubhouse and medical/training areas, the facility includes a media interview room, offices, a player lounge/dining room, expanded video scouting room and even a “party room” for players to celebrate after a victory.

The old tight nine-foot-wide clubhouse built behind the third base dugout in 1984 has now been converted into a batting cage and eliminates the need to take on-field batting practice on a daily basis.
Circular locker room boosts camaraderie

The new circular Cubs locker room area was designed to promote team cohesiveness with equality for all players so that no one had a "corner" to contrast with the rectangular Yankee Stadium locker room. The width of the Cubs locker room is 60.5 feet, the same distance from a pitcher's mound to home plate in what Rice said was a "happy coincidence," A lounge area in the middle features flat screen TVs and a flashy Cubs logo on the ceiling.

Sports medicine facilities

The Cubs now have a state-of-the-art sports medicine facility on-site to rapidly diagnose and treat injured players. As an occupational and sports medicine specialist, it is important in the rehabilitation process to be part of a team and interact with teammates. The Cubs recognize this basic principle in the recovery process.

Now, instead of having to ship players to larger quarters in Arizona for extended rehabilitation, injured players now have a world-class facility to quickly recover and return back to the playing field. With the rehab facility next to Wrigley Field, injured players will stay connected to the team which facilities recovery.

The clubhouse also has an on-site X-ray facility to immediately access players who are injured.

Plyometric training room

The Plyometric Training Room features some of the Cubs’ new Pilates apparatus.

The Cubs have Wunda chairs, which are resistance exercise apparatus designed by Joseph Pilates. The Pilates Wunda chair is basically a box with one side that can be pressed down against the resistance of springs, like a large pedal. Sometimes the pedal portion is divided into two parts that can be worked independently. It is excellent for strengthening the core muscles, and also the arms and legs.

Thanks to Jake Arrieta’s success in crediting his Pilates work with turning himself into the 2015 Cy Young winner, baseball is embracing Pilates as another conditioning tool to improve performance. Missing on the tour was Arrieta’s reformer apparatus. The device was out of the clubhouse for the day. Its absence was not an easy feat because a reformer is a very long bed-like frame with a flat platform on it, called the carriage, which rolls back and forth on wheels within the frame.
As of yet, the Cubs do not have a Pilates Cadillac apparatus yet (which requires even more space than the reformer). Epstein told me that the Cubs have a Cadillac apparatus to be delivered shortly.

As a sports medicine physician, I strongly encourage baseball players to turn to Pilates to help develop a strong core and improve flexibility (full disclosure: I am an owner of [www.217pilates.com](http://www.217pilates.com) as well as [www.217rehab.com](http://www.217rehab.com)). The Cubs appear to take a leadership role with Pilates conditioning for its players after Arrieta’s breakout Cy Young season and dominating start to 2016. White Sox pitcher Chris Sale, who began 8-0 in 2016, has also recently embraced Pilates as part of his conditioning.

**Strength and conditioning room**

The new space is seven times larger than the old clubhouse. This room covers 3,800 square feet and features standard weight-room equipment.

I did not see an AlterG anti-gravity treadmill (alterg.com) in the clubhouse. I asked Epstein about this piece of equipment. He responded the AlterG was on order. My rehab clinic (217rehab.com) in Champaign was the first to offer in the area this NASA-inspired differential air pressure technology to help my patients with non-painful, controlled weight-bearing early in the recovery period.

The AlterG treadmill can unweight up to 80 percent of a patient’s body weight as the patient is supported in these high-tech shorts that are pumped up by air pressure in a tent-like device. Studies (and my own clinical experience) show the AlterG can facilitate earlier return to activity prevents atrophy of supporting muscles, decreases swelling and improves outcomes. AlterG will become the standard of care in rehabilitation and will be soon be in all MLB clubhouses.

One of the reasons why Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright returned so fast after his 2015 Achilles-tendon injury was because he rehabbed on the AlterG. Cubs Head Trainer P.J. Mainville will enjoy having the AlterG around for his players and you can be sure Schwarber will benefit with the AlterG anti-gravity treadmill for his ACL/LCL reconstruction rehab.

**ATI physical therapy training room**

The ATI physical therapy training room has all the traditional passive physical therapy modalities. It is a smaller version of my 217 rehab facility. There is cryotherapy (ice) treatment, electrical stimulation and iontophoresis units to treat the players’ injuries and facilitate rapid healing.
**Water therapy room**

Along with traditional underwater aquatic therapy pools, the Cubs even have a salt water floatation tank to help players relax and feel refreshed. These tanks have around 10 inches of salt water fortified that allows one to float without effort.

The constant temperature, plus the absence of light and sounds, makes one lose track of your five senses very quickly. You emerge from the pod feeling relaxed, yet alert. These space time tanks create an experience that is like returning back to the womb. My own experience with these floatation tanks is that it is similar to the relaxing experience one gets laying in a tanning bed without the dangerous UV rays.

The Cubs also have a hyperbaric oxygen chamber, a prime unit for rapidly healing wounds and infections. In a hyperbaric oxygen therapy chamber, the air pressure is increased to three times higher than normal air pressure and, under these conditions, our lungs take in more oxygen than would be possible breathing pure oxygen at normal air pressure. This helps fight bacteria and stimulates the release of substances called growth factors and stem cells, which promote healing. The White Sox have used hyperbaric oxygen chamber therapy for their players for several years, according to team physician Charles Bush-Joseph.

I am going to suggest the Cubs add a HydroTrack aquatic pool unit (which is classified as a swimming pool at my office by the Illinois Dept. of Public Health). This area also features an infrared sauna and steam room for the players to relax and enjoy. The advantage of this therapy is to rid one’s body of toxins by sweat.

**Players Lounge and Dining Room**

The only area that was off-limits for photographs was the players lounge and dining room. The lounge has the feel of a mix between a large college dorm party room and arcade gaming parlor with an awesome sound system. The lounge area features nine flat-screen TVs, a ping-pong table, air hockey, shuffleboard and a stand filled with electric guitars for players to strap on and blast away to their hearts content.

In contrast to the players lounge, the dining room area is more mundane, but is another essential element in the cutting-edge sports medicine program that the Cubs have developed.

The players’ dining room is equipped with a nutrition center that stocked with organic food, EDIC trail mix, almond milk, Naked smoothies, and a Gatorade bar and other assorted healthy choices that young men of the Cubs’ ages would normally not be interested in.

The dining room’s kitchen is also staffed to provide player-specific meals as part of an organization-wide focus on nutrition. The kitchen allows players to take out nutrient-dense food prepared in the dining room and bring it home.

With the focus on nutrition, the Cubs are working to create a wellness mindset in all aspects of their players’ careers and lives.
Mini-Cubs museum

Throughout this clubhouse are large frame pictures and murals displaying Wrigley Field and Cubs history. Kenney emphasized that current players need to be exposed on a daily basis to Cubs history that goes back to 1876.

Now every time the players walk out to the dugout from their lockers, they will get an opportunity to view important pieces of the team’s history, including the 1932 pennant-winning team picture.

Conclusion

The new clubhouse gets four stars from my critical viewpoint as a sports medicine physician. They have created a specialized occupational medicine clinic that focuses on the occupation of baseball playing with a grueling travel schedule. The Cubs still are handicapped by the fact city ordinances prevent playing the majority of games at night at Wrigley Field to correspond with the schedules of all other MLB teams. Thus, the players are still exposed to the ravages of shift work disorders due to changing nature of their work schedules that affects their circadian rhythm.

Overall, the Cubs have created a very nurturing environment, where every member of the team can feel at home and prepare for the day’s game in a relaxing atmosphere. They eat healthy, nutritious food and have an unconfined work space, where they can relax. Players desire to show up early and benefit with this tremendous facility.

The new clubhouse sets the tone the Cubs are all about winning and eliminates the stigma of horrible facilities that hounded the team and hurt in the recruitment of free agents. Certainly, the new facility -- on top of the Cubs’ now-winning ways -- will help attract top-tier free agent talents. The facility allows the players to maximize their recovery if hurt. More importantly, the clubhouse will help prevent injuries with conditioning and new options such as Pilates training.

Footnotes

1. During the 1st half of the 20th Century, this triangular parcel of land on the West side of Wrigley Field was a coal yard operated by Collins & Wiese Coal Company. In 1961, the drive-in restaurant chain Henry’s bought the land as a location for a restaurant and 200 parking spaces. The acquisition and development of the land cost approximately $700,000. source: http://temporarytraveloffice.net/parkingStuff/ChicagoZineWeb.pdf
2. Plyometrics, which is also known as "jump training" or "plyos", are athletic performance enhancement exercises in which muscles exert maximum force in short intervals of time, with the goal of increasing power (speed-strength).

3. German native Joseph Pilates (1883-1967) invented his eponymous fitness system in the first half of the 20th century. He published his landmark book “Return to Life Through Contrology” in 1945 that presents his method as the art of controlled movements, which should look and feel like a workout (not a therapy) when properly manifested. If practiced with consistency, Pilates improves flexibility, builds strength and develops control and endurance in the entire body. Pilates puts emphasis on alignment, breathing, developing a strong core, and improving coordination and balance. Joseph Pilates designed a variety of equipment, for which he used the term "apparatus." Each apparatus was designed to help accelerate the process of stretching, strengthening, body alignment and increased core strength started by the mat work. The best-known and most popular apparatus today, the Reformer, was originally called the Universal Reformer, aptly named for "universally reforming the body." Eventually Pilates developed a full line of equipment and accessories was designed by, including the Cadillac, Wunda Chair, High "Electric" Chair, Spine Corrector, Ladder Barrel and Pedi-Pole.

4. NASA developed the differential air pressure technique as a way for astronauts to exercise and maintain conditioning in space.

5. The Cubs Hyperbaric oxygen unit was not on display during the tour. The floatation tank was incorrectly referred to the media during the tour as “a hyperbaric oxygen floatation tank”. A few days later I asked Cubs official Kevin Seghy about this unit a few days after the tour. "We have both devices, but the hyperbaric oxygen tank was not out for display/use yet during our tour,” Seghy said. "It seems the two devices got lumped together during Theo/ Crane’s comments as folks were reporting.”

6. The Hydrotrack upright heated pool unit features the buoyancy of heated water and the cushioning of the specially designed Skid-Plate/Belt treadmill system that provides a Low-Impact Therapy session. The Hydrotrack system (www.hydrotrack.com) features a variable speed, reversible, treadmill ranging from .2 mph to 7 mph with jets for added resistance. The Hydrotrack features a Foyer Entry System, allowing for a rapid patient entry/exit for reduced down time. The Foyer also allows for a variable water height during treatments. Together, the AlterG and Hydrotrack offer my patients at 217 Rehab the 1-2 punch to return to work or the playing field faster.